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# THE REPORT OF THE NEW YORK SCHOOL INQUIRY

## THE SYSTEM OF GENERAL SUPERVISION AND THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

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On January 27, 1912, the Committee on School Inquiry of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of New York City made public the special report dealing with the system of general supervision and the work of the Board of Examiners. This report dealt with the school system as to its organization and operation "higher up," and contained recommendations of far-reaching importance. In view of the widespread interest in the work of the Inquiry, the presentation of the following general survey of the contents of the report, together with the specific recommendations resulting therefrom, may be considered timely.

This special report is a document of 144 printed pages, and is prefaced by an analytical summary prepared by Professor Hanus, who was in general charge of the educational aspects of the School Inquiry. The nine separate sections of the report will be treated in order.

The first section deals with the general scope of the report, the methods pursued in the Inquiry, and a discussion of the fundamental nature of school control, in which the distinctive characteristics and differences of the legislative, administrative, supervisory, and inspectorial forms of control are indicated. The conclusion of this section is significant:

All of the evidence considered during the conduct of this portion of the Inquiry has revealed and emphasized this important fact, namely, that there seems to be nowhere, at least within the school system, a clear and conscious discrimination between those activities of control that are administrative in character, and those that are supervisory or inspectorial. The absence of this distinction in the minds of those charged with the main responsibility has been, it is believed, an important factor in retarding the progress and complicating the development of the public-school system (p. 9).

The second section gives a brief historical statement of the development of the existing plan of school organization and control

since the passage of the Greater New York charter in 1897. On the basis of the study made of the relationship and interdependence of the several boards, officers, and other instrumentalities that constitute the existing scheme of school control, and after a study of the general principles under which this control is operative, the conclusion was reached that—

The schools have been maintained under a form of control that is distinctly administrative and mechanical; a form of control that has not kept a single eye on the real substance and worth of teaching and education. The schools have not been kept, however, under the influence of that effective supervision and inspection which gives unity, purpose, and high standard of attainment to the work of teachers. *There is a striking lack of consciousness within the school system of the radical difference between merely keeping the schools in operation, and keeping the schools in operation so as to produce tangible results of high quality. The organization of the school has been from the top down, rather than from the bottom up; a procedure as obstructive to progress and real growth in education as it is in other human institutions* (p. 17).

The third section deals with the school as the unit for supervision, with special reference to the situation existing in the elementary schools. A general summary of the principal findings of this portion of the report is as follows:

- a) The number of supervisors (principals, etc.) provided for elementary schools is entirely adequate for effective supervision.
- b) The salary schedules are such as to attract men and women of competence.
- c) The tendency is to appoint men and women whose education, training, and experience have been too exclusively within the city.
- d) The position of the principal is primarily administrative, rather than supervisory.
- e) The system of rating the efficiency of principals is not such as to distinguish the competent from the incompetent (pp. 32-33).

The fourth section considers the organization, status, and functions of the staff of district superintendents.

The major results of this consideration are:

- a) While the general theory of the plan of the district superintendent in the supervisory organization is a sound one, this theory is not, as to its essential elements, carried out in practice.
- b) The supervisory districts are too large to permit the district superintendents properly to fulfil their responsibilities as supervisors. Many of these should be transferred to the principals of schools.

c) The existing method of selecting district superintendents too narrowly confines choice to those whose education, training, and experience have been entirely within the city.

d) The absence of a definite and high standard of qualification for selection and retention of district superintendents has limited the supervisory usefulness of these officers.

e) The relation between the Board of Superintendents and the district superintendents is such as to restrict unnecessarily the freedom, initiative, and responsibility of the latter with respect to matters of fundamental educational importance. Provision should be made for the larger participation of the district superintendents in the making of educational policies (pp. 41-42).

As to the supervision of the special branches, including kindergartens, as presented in the fifth section the report concludes:

a) Under existing conditions the number of directors and assistant directors, excepting for the kindergarten, is sufficient to secure proper supervision of the special subjects. The relation of the director to the principal and the district superintendent is in need of clearer definition, and his responsibility for the scope and method of his subject should be recognized.

b) Special teachers in certain of the special subjects should be made unnecessary by requiring competency on the part of regular teachers.

c) More adequate provisions should be made for the supervision of the kindergarten by the appointment of additional assistant directors, and by making elementary school principals responsible for the supervision of the kindergartens to the same degree as they are for the other classes (p. 48).

Obviously, the most important section of the report deals with the office of the city superintendent, the organization and functions of the Board of Superintendents, and the activities of the associate superintendents. The following paragraphs are significant of the results of the inquiry upon these points:

The limitations of this inquiry make it impossible to do more than to express a series of general judgments and recommendations regarding the office of the city superintendent as at present constituted. Concerning one important feature of the particular issue, the members of the staff engaged on the educational aspects of the School Inquiry are unanimously agreed—that the centralization of large administrative and supervisory authority in the city superintendent, as provided for by the revised charter, was absolutely necessary for the creation of a scheme of responsible school direction free from those prejudices and partisanships that have so often disorganized the institutions and public service of the city. That the schools of Greater New York have, during the past decade, been consolidated into a coherent whole is due, without question, to the perseverance, foresight, and wisdom of the present city superintendent. His unyielding loyalty to certain of the fundamental principles of

school control has brought the policy of centralization to a successful end. No serious study of the facts and circumstances of the development of the school system could lead to any other conclusion.

The city superintendent has achieved distinguished success in protecting the school system and the teaching staff from the selfish influences that are always found in the public service of a great city—and this is conspicuous success. Through his long term of office, he has naturally aroused strong personal and organized opposition to his policies; but no competent and principled man could do otherwise.

No other educational leader of this generation has had a task of such magnitude and complexity. It is very improbable that any other man could have succeeded as he has in unifying the school system and harmonizing the educational forces of the city. Through his service and performances, the office of city superintendent of schools in this country has been greatly magnified. He has made the New York public-school system one of nation-wide significance.

Mechanical consolidation, with the resulting standardization of aims and values, has been effected. The next epoch of educational control will need to be dominated by the idea of establishing a scheme of *decentralized, co-operative, expert* supervision. Military standards of authority and organization cannot be permanently adapted to the enterprise of education. Education, particularly public education, is a great *co-operative* undertaking, and, therefore, must make provision for the initiative, independence, and creative activity of every individual charged with responsibility. The administrative efficiency of a great, complex school system demands a high degree of centralization of administrative power. On the other hand, the supervisory efficiency of the school system is conditioned by a degree of co-operation which has not yet been fully comprehended by the city superintendent. Machinery *stifles individuality; co-operative effort expands individuality*. The teaching of children and the direction of their education are dependent, ultimately, upon freedom, not repression.

The pre-eminent difficulty of the existing situation arises, as has already been pointed out, from the failure clearly to distinguish between effective administrative control and effective supervisory control. In so far as the city superintendent is an administrative officer, his powers should be broad and direct. As a supervisory officer, he should be the executive agent of the supervisory and teaching staff. In several respects his administrative authority should be enlarged. This is especially true with regard to many of the activities now under the control of the Board of Superintendents. The scope and method of his supervisory functions need to be submitted to thorough study and investigation, far more thorough than is possible during the present inquiry. Consequently, it has been recommended that the Bureau of Investigation and Appraisal, as proposed in this report, undertake to define the legitimate functions of the city superintendent as a supervisory officer, with the end of securing

to the schools the benefits of the great amount of productive power which, under the present organization, must be latent. The proposed plan of reorganization of the supervisory staff and the creation of the Supervisory Council is merely suggestive of the idea of efficient, co-operative organization (p. 52).

The variety of evidence considered justifies the positions taken in the report that the attitude of the city superintendent and the associate superintendents, acting either in an individual official capacity, or collectively, as the Board of Superintendents, toward the members of the teaching and supervisory staff has discouraged competent criticism of the methods and effectiveness of the school system, and has prevented the development of a necessary spirit of co-operation within the school organization; that the present machinery of control represented by the city superintendent, the Board of Superintendents, and the associate superintendents is too complicated for effective administration, and too bureaucratic for effective supervision; that a larger concentration of authority over matters of routine and administrative character in the city superintendent, and a reorganization of the supervisory control so as to provide for a wider, responsible participation of the members of the teaching and supervisory staff in the making and oversight of educational policies, are necessary.

From one point of view the body controlling the qualifications of those appointed to the teaching and supervisory staff in a metropolitan city is the key to the effectiveness of the educational work accomplished. During the seven years, 1905-12, the Board of Examiners for the city examined over 90,000 persons for certificates. This Board licensed over 60,000 candidates. The most important conclusions concerning the Board of Examiners are:

a) The Board of Examiners, by its methods and standards, determines the character of the demands made upon the supervisory staff.

b) The Board of Examiners has a tremendous annual task in conducting the wide variation of examinations of many thousands of candidates for teachers' licenses.

c) The method and standards of the Board of Examiners have been such as to select the more fit of those presenting themselves for examination.

d) The Board of Examiners has sought constantly to adapt itself in a progressive way to the changing needs of the school system.

e) The constitution of the Board of Examiners so as to include the city superintendent is to be desired.

f) The enlargement of the Board of Examiners would contribute to its effectiveness (p. 75).

The eighth section of the report considers critically the methods and standards employed for determining teaching efficiency. The general conclusions are as follows:

a) The determination of the fitness or unfitness of teachers for continuance and promotion in the school system represents the chief task of the supervisory staff and the best test of its service to the schools.

b) The certainty with which the initial probationary license is renewed to permanency may be largely accounted for by formality that characterizes the inspections and reports upon service.

c) The approval of service as "fit and meritorious" does not depend upon thorough and impersonal inspections necessary for obtaining any true measure of a teacher's efficiency.

d) The means and methods for the regular annual and semiannual ratings of teachers and principals are not such as to produce results commensurate with the labor involved or calculated to raise the level of teaching performance within the schools.

e) The principle of "superior merit," for teachers in high schools, introduced by the salary legislation of 1911 is a valid one, capable of serviceable extension to the teachers in elementary schools (p. 84).

The ninth and last section of the report contains the four important recommendations for the reorganization of the supervisory staff:

(1) That appropriate steps be taken to secure the necessary legislation for the abolishment of the Board of Superintendents and the position of associate city superintendent; and that a careful, detailed study be made of the powers and duties now belonging to the city superintendent, to the Board of Superintendents, and to the associate city superintendents, to the end of securing a more efficient and economical distribution of the necessary administrative and supervisory powers and duties among the city superintendent, the proposed Supervisory Council, the district superintendents, and the principals of schools.

(2) That appropriate steps be taken to secure the creation of a Supervisory Council to be composed of the city superintendent, all of the district superintendents, and a selected number of directors, principals of training schools, principals of high schools, principals of elementary schools, and representatives from the teaching staff in the various types and grades of schools.

(3) That there be established, as an integral part of the system of school control, a Bureau of Division of Investigation and Appraisal.

(4) That the Board of Examiners be reorganized so as to provide for nine members, including the city superintendent of schools, *ex officio*; the service of the eight appointed members to be arranged so as to permit each member to devote every fourth year to supervisory, or other special duty in the school system (pp. 85-90).